United Nations A/71/393/Add.1

General Assembly

Distr.: General
21 September 2016

Original: English

Seventy-first session
Agenda item 140
Joint Inspection Unit

Succession planning in the United Nations system organizations

Note by the Secretary-General

Addendum

The Secretary-General has the honour to transmit to the members of the General Assembly his comments and those of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination on the report of the Joint Inspection Unit entitled "Succession planning in the United Nations system organizations".

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Summary

In the report entitled "Succession planning in the United Nations system organizations", the Joint Inspection Unit seeks to identify the challenges and good practices inherent in this crucial component of workforce planning. The Unit proposes solutions and identifies good practices that organizations can apply, together with benchmarks, to improve their succession planning activities. The report's four recommendations, which are directed at legislative bodies, executive heads and the Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, are intended to, among other things, enhance the control, compliance and accountability of executive heads, strengthen coordination and enhance the effectiveness of human resource succession planning activities.

The present note reflects the views of organizations of the United Nations system on the recommendations provided in the report. The views have been consolidated on the basis of input provided by member organizations of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, which welcomed the report and supported some of its conclusions.

I. Introduction

1. In the report entitled "Succession planning in the United Nations system organizations", the Joint Inspection Unit seeks to identify the challenges and good practices inherent in this crucial component of workforce planning. The Unit proposes solutions and identifies good practices that organizations can apply, together with benchmarks, to improve their succession planning activities. The report's four recommendations, which are directed at legislative bodies, executive heads and the Secretary-General, in his capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, are intended to, among other things, enhance the control, compliance and accountability of executive heads, strengthen coordination and enhance the effectiveness of human resource succession planning activities.

II. General comments

2. Organizations welcome the report, which they find informative and useful. They note that it is a comprehensive report reflecting the overall concept, definitions and approaches with regard to talent management and succession planning and the current strategies, frameworks, policies and practices adopted by the organizations that participated in the review. Furthermore, organizations agree that succession planning is an important aspect of organizational management and that they, if they have not already done so, should enhance succession planning through strategies, tools and talent and pipeline analytics.

3. While organizations consider succession planning to be a critical business process that can help to ensure the continuous successful delivery of their mandates and express agreement with the overall thrust and principles of the report, some organizations note that existing rules and regulations and established procedures may not support the approach to succession planning applied in the report. Others indicate that, when introducing succession planning schemes, consideration should be given to maintaining an adequate balance between advertising vacancies internally and/or externally to avoid creating expectations of career development on the part of existing staff, along with potential demotivation should someone else be appointed. In addition, it is considered that the implementation of some of the recommendations may imply changes in policies and therefore require consultations with governing bodies. Lastly, some organizations note that the report would have benefited from an analysis and estimate of the resources required and an analysis of the costs and benefits of implementing formal, stand-alone frameworks, especially given that formal succession planning requires resources, that human resource activities, frameworks and initiatives that do not comprise stand-alone, formal succession planning frameworks nevertheless can enhance succession planning and that there are already competing priorities in the human resources area.

4. Another challenge associated with succession planning that was mentioned is the uncertainty regarding human resource management during strategic realignments, organizational reprioritization, senior leadership changes, general restructuring and with regard to partner priorities (in particular for voluntarily funded organizations). In times of significant change, succession planning efforts may need to be partially postponed until emerging requirements are clearer. It was

also suggested that the recommendations should be addressed for information only to some small headquarters-based, normative agencies.

III. Specific comments on recommendations

Recommendation 1

The legislative/governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations should exercise their oversight role and examine the causes for the lack of, and/or the delay in, the introduction of formal succession planning in their respective organizations, including the adequacy of current funding; and request the executive heads of these organizations to develop formal succession planning without any further delay, by the end of 2017.

5. Noting that the recommendation is directed at legislative bodies, organizations generally support the introduction of formal succession planning mechanisms, although the timeline for the completion of comprehensive succession planning (by the end of 2017) could be overly ambitious. It is also noted that the need for broad consultation and multilayered approval processes add complexity to staffing decisions; for example, some organizations are required by their governing bodies to circulate all vacancies internally and externally, thereby limiting their ability to leverage succession planning mechanisms.

Recommendation 2

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations, who have not yet done so, should instruct their human resources management offices to develop and implement appropriate frameworks for succession planning strategies, and devise appropriate guidelines on the succession planning process without any further delay, by the end of 2017.

6. While organizations generally support the recommendation, some note that the timeline could be overly ambitious and that institutionalizing succession planning may have implications for existing human resource capacity, together with additional resource requirements. It is noted that organizations may benefit from sharing activities, frameworks and initiatives as a way to strengthen succession planning frameworks and strategies, and that complementary activities (such as talent pools and career frameworks) can further the objectives underlying the recommendation, even in the absence of formal, stand-alone succession plans.

Recommendation 3

The executive heads of the United Nations system organizations should instruct their human resources management offices to adopt the benchmarks set out in the present report with a view to ensuring that their organizations have a sound succession planning process, and should report on the progress made to their legislative/governing bodies.

7. Organizations generally support the recommendation, and many indicate an interest in the benchmarks, with several noting that succession planning initiatives that respond to those benchmarks are already under way or in place. It was also suggested that the recommendation could be clarified to include that reporting

would be performed only as required by member States when there were no relevant agenda items at the regular sessions of the governing bodies under which to report on such matters periodically.

8. It was noted that the very specific technical nature and broad mandate of some organizations required careful consideration before implementing the benchmarks, which could have a financial impact, both as a one-time investment at the outset of the project and as ongoing resources to ensure continuing functions. Consequently, further analysis of the financial impact and resources may be required in order to fully implement the benchmarks.

9. It was suggested that recommendation 1 had already captured the legislative body reporting element of recommendation 3 and did not require repeating.

Recommendation 4

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, in his capacity as Chair of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, should ensure that succession planning is reinstated as a main agenda item of the Human Resources Network of the High-level Committee on Management, and given the utmost attention and most serious consideration in the future sessions of the Network.

10. Organizations support the recommendation.